

Minutes

OF A MEETING OF THE

Council



Listening Learning Leading

**Held on Thursday 12 December 2024 at 6.00 pm
Didcot Civic Hall, Britwell Road, Didcot, OX11 7JN**

Present in the meeting room:

Councillors: Katharine Keats-Rohan (Vice-Chair in the chair), Pieter-Paul Barker, James Barlow, Tim Bearder, Robin Bennett, David Bretherton, Peter Dragonetti, Stefan Gawrysiak, Mike Giles, Ali Gordon-Creed, Georgina Heritage, Sam James-Lawrie, Alexandrine Kantor, Katharine Keats-Rohan, Mocky Khan, Axel Macdonald, Denise Macdonald, James Norman, Leigh Rawlins, Jo Robb, David Rouane, Anne-Marie Simpson, Ian Snowdon, Andrew Tinsley, Crispin Topping, David Turner and Tony Worgan

Officers: Nick Bennett, Head of Legal and Democratic and Monitoring Officer, Steven Corrigan, Democratic Services Manager and Simon Hewings, Head of Finance

48 Minutes

RESOLVED: to approve the minutes of the meeting held on 24 October 2024 as a correct record and agree that the Chair sign them as such.

49 Apologies

Apologies for absence were submitted on behalf of Councillors Arlett, Casey-Rerhaye, Cooper, Filipova-Rivers, Gregory, Hinton, Mohammed, Powell, Sadler and Van Mierlo.

50 Declarations of interest

None.

51 Urgent business and chair's announcements

The Chair provided general housekeeping information.

52 Public participation

- A. The following question was submitted by Mr Salmons to Councillor Bennett, Cabinet member for economic development and regeneration:

“It is now over four years since the Council announced its intention to make Didcot Gateway the location for its new headquarters, and well over a year since the Council submitted its planning application for the scheme.

Much like the confidential land acquisition on the agenda this evening, the Council appeared to do everything possible to exclude the public from the decision-making process over the scheme. All important decisions regarding the principle and design of the proposed office were made in confidential sessions on the basis of confidential reports.

During the last election campaign, the Leader of the Council seemed to imply the choice was between the existing 300 home allocation for the site, or a scaled back proposal of 144 homes alongside the Council's proposed office. Since then, work on the Joint Local Plan has seen the housing allocation creep back up to 200, in addition to the proposed employment use for the site. Incredibly, this week it emerged SODC has responded to the latest JLP consultation as landowner pushing back against the reduction from 300 to 200 homes.

There has been no meaningful public engagement on the principle of the scheme, which continues to attract objections from Oxfordshire County Council, Western Valley Parish Council, and a raft of local residents.

Even Didcot Town Council, where the Leader of this Council is chair of the planning committee and was present when their response to the scheme was debated, couldn't bring themselves to express support for the scheme, remarking that the proposed building “does not seem beautiful”, an extraordinary assessment for a building which should serve as an enduring landmark at the gateway to the largest town in the district.

Throughout all of this, many residents remain concerned over the ever increasing cost of the scheme. At the Scrutiny Committee meeting in January 2023, almost two years ago, it was advised the ‘budget envelope’ for the scheme was an eye-watering £25 million. That is almost £400 for every household in the district.

Could the Cabinet member advise on the latest cost estimate, taking into account the widely reported delays, and whether the Council still intends to press ahead with the scheme despite local opposition, and without any meaningful public engagement on the principle of the scheme?”

Councillor Bennett provided the following response:

“It's worth noting, at this stage, that the proposals are for a council-owned building as part of the regeneration of an under-used brownfield site. The building would include space for the council offices alongside lettable space to act as a potentially valuable revenue stream.

The planning application for the building is still currently being assessed. An updated planning pack with new information was submitted in October 2024 and is available online. Large applications like this can often take quite some time, and it's clearly very

important to get it right, and so at this stage I will not comment further on the planning application.

There are a variety of reasons some decisions related to this project have been taken in confidential session and that the any detailed budget estimates have not yet been publicly disclosed – this includes ensuring the council meets its obligation to get best value during procurement processes. If contract bidders are aware of what your earmarked potential budget is, their quotes tend to match that figure rather than try to be more competitive.

Throughout the process, we have publicised and promoted our proposals, from initial concept designs through to the planning application submission, and we have invited our communities to provide their comments and feedback through the planning application process. As the question notes, we've received a raft of responses through that process. It's perfectly normal for officers representing different departments in the council and representing the many and varied roles the council has, to put forward contrasting views as part of a Local Plan public engagement exercise. The Planning Inspector examining the plan will understand the difference between our roles as a local landowner and the Planning Authority submitting the plan, and the inspector will consider all the views appropriately.

The final decision on whether to go ahead with the project has not yet been taken. Further considerations for the decision include a business case - including the latest projected costs once established - a detailed expert assessment of the building's revenue generating potential, the council and our communities' needs, and many other factors".

- B. Councillor Sally Povolotsky, a member of Vale of White Horse District Council, addressed Council on agenda item 11 – Councillors' Allowances Scheme. She urged members not to support the proposed increase in the level of allowances at a time when many residents were still suffering from the cost-of-living crisis.

53 Petitions

None.

54 Joint Audit and Governance Committee Annual Report

Councillor Khan, Co-Chair of the Joint Audit and Governance Committee, presented the annual report. He noted that this was the first time that the Joint Audit and Governance Committee had produced an annual report which addressed the recommendations of the external advisor engaged to provide training to the committee last year, and also that of the Chartered Institute of Public Finance and Accountancy (CIPFA).

He highlighted that the report set out the work of the committee:

- signing off the financial statements and receiving the reports of work undertaken by the councils' auditors, EY;
- consideration of treasury management reports;
- consideration of reports on internal audit's activity; and
- consideration of reports on governance and risk management, including code of conduct, complaints and Regulation of Investigatory Powers.

Council welcomed and noted the annual report as attached to the Council agenda for the meeting held on 12 December 2025.

55 Review of Joint Gambling Policy

Councillor Robb, Chair of the Licensing Acts Committee, introduced the report and recommendations. She advised that Council was recommended to adopt the revised version of the Joint Gambling Policy to meet the legal requirement to have a new policy ready to take effect from 31 January 2025.

The previous policy was reviewed with some minor changes made in respect of contact information, links and dates. A consultation ran for 4 weeks in August with just one blank response.

The Licensing Acts Committee met 21 November 2024 and resolved to recommend Council adopt and publish the proposed policy, subject to any minor editorial changes, and to authorise the head of communities to publish the policy in accordance with the regulations. In addition, the Committee recommended Council to retain the current 'no casino' resolution. The continuation of this resolution would mean that, if an opportunity to bid was added to the list of local authorities able to have a casino came up, the council would not be able to do this.

RESOLVED: to

1. adopt the proposed Joint Gambling Policy as attached to the Council agenda for the meeting held on 12 December 2024,
2. authorise the head of communities to make minor editorial changes to the Joint Gambling Policy,
3. authorise the head of communities to publish the Joint Gambling Policy in accordance with the Gambling Act 2005 (Licensing Authority Policy Statement) (England and Wales) Regulations 2006,
4. adopt a 'no casino' resolution under section 166 (1) of the Gambling Act 2005, meaning that any application for a casino would not be considered.

56 Council tax reduction scheme 2025/26

Council considered the report of the head of finance on the proposed Council Tax Reduction (CTR) scheme for 2025/26. Cabinet had considered the report at its meeting on 28 November 2024 and recommended that Council adopt the scheme with an amendment to extend the period in which a new claim can be backdated from six months to 12 months.

The Cabinet member for finance and property assets introduced the scheme, which aimed to help residents who apply late for a reduction in council tax. While the number of cases affected would be small, Cabinet had agreed that it was a worthwhile change to support those in greatest need.

Council supported the proposed amendment which would have a positive impact for vulnerable residents whilst having a minor financial impact for the council.

RESOLVED: that for the 2025/26 financial year onwards the council continues to adopt the previous 2024/25 Council Tax Reduction (CTR) Scheme but with the following amendment:

- a) Extend the period in which a new claim for CTR can be backdated from six months to twelve months, where good cause has been demonstrated.

57 Council tax base 2025/26

Council considered the head of finance's report on setting the council tax base for 2025/26. Cabinet had considered the report at its meeting on 28 November 2024 and had recommended Council adopt the report recommendations.

The Cabinet member for finance reported that each year the council was required to calculate its council tax base and pass this information on to Oxfordshire County Council, Thames Valley Police, and parish councils, to allow them to calculate their council tax element for the forthcoming year.

RESOLVED to:

1. approve the report of the head of finance for the calculation of the council's tax base and the calculation of the tax base for each parish area for 2025/2026,
2. agree that, in accordance with The Local Authorities (Calculation of Council Tax Base) (England) Regulations 2012, the amount calculated by South Oxfordshire District Council as its council tax base for the year 2025/26 be 63,639.9, and
3. agree that, in accordance with The Local Authorities (Calculation of Council Tax Base) (England) Regulations 2012, the amount calculated by South Oxfordshire District Council as the council tax base for the year 2025/26 for each parish be the amount shown against the name of that parish in Appendix A of the report of the head of finance to Council on 12 December 2024.

58 Councillors' Allowances Scheme

Council considered the findings of the Independent Remuneration Panel, including recommendations for the basic allowance and the special responsibility allowances for members.

Councillor Rouane moved, and Councillor Robb seconded, the following motion to accept the Independent Remuneration Panel's recommendations:

This Council:

1. Thanks the independent panel for their work.
2. Recognises that the current level of allowances acts as a significant barrier to attracting a diverse range of people to put themselves forward to become councillors, particularly to those on low incomes or with caring responsibilities, and that the proposed new level of allowances goes some way towards addressing this.
3. Recognises that there is still uncertainty regarding the budget for next year, in particular with regard to the level of funding from central government and the impact of new government policies on the cost of certain core services.

4. Agrees to implement the proposals of the panel, from the commencement of 2025/26 subject to full Council approval for the costs to be included in the 2025/26 budget when it is considered in February 2025.

The majority of members supported the motion noting that a rise in allowances could open the door to a wider group of people being able to stand for election and represent their communities and not just those who were in a position to sacrifice money and time. A number expressed the view that the proposed increase in the level of allowances could not be justified particularly in the current cost of living crisis and having regard to the likely pay award for officers. A number of members also expressed disquiet about the current legal provisions for setting their own allowances and expressed views that central government should change the current legislation so that allowances should be set centrally and applied across the country.

RESOLVED: to

1. Thank the independent panel for their work.
2. Recognise that the current level of allowances acts as a significant barrier to attracting a diverse range of people to put themselves forward to become councillors, particularly to those on low incomes or with caring responsibilities, and that the proposed new level of allowances goes some way towards addressing this.
3. Recognise that there is still uncertainty regarding the budget for next year, in particular with regard to the level of funding from central government and the impact of new government policies on the cost of certain core services.
4. Agree to implement the proposals of the panel, from the commencement of 2025/26 subject to full Council approval for the costs to be included in the 2025/26 budget when it is considered in February 2025.

59 Review of political balance following the Cholsey by-election

Council considered the report of the head of legal and democratic on a review of the political balance following the Cholsey by-election. The report set out that the election of Councillor Topping, and his subsequent membership of the Liberal Democrat Group, did not alter the political balance or the allocation of seats on committees.

RESOLVED: to

1. note that, as a result of the Cholsey by election held on 5 December 2024, there is no change to the allocation of seats to political groups on committees and panels,
2. authorise the head of legal and democratic to make appointments to any vacant committee or panel seat and substitute positions in accordance with the wishes of the relevant group leader.

60 Report of the leader of the council

Councillor Rouane, Leader of the council, provided an update on a number of matters. The text of his address is available on the council's [website](#).

61 Future Oxfordshire Partnership - recent activity by South representatives' update

Council noted the Future Oxfordshire Partnership update report attached to the agenda for the Council meeting held on 12 December 2024.

62 Questions on notice

None.

63 Motions on notice

None.

64 Exclusion of the public

RESOLVED: to exclude members of the press and public from the meeting for the following item of business under Part 1 of Schedule 12A Section 100A(4) of the Local Government Act 1972 and as amended by the Local Government (Access to Information) (Variation) Order 2006 on the grounds that:

- i. it involves the likely disclosure of exempt information as defined in paragraph 3 of Part 1 of Schedule 12A of the Act, and
- ii. the public interest in maintaining the exemption outweighs the public interest in disclosing the information.

65 Land acquisition (see confidential minute)

Council considered and supported Cabinet's recommendations, made at its meeting on 28 November 2024, on the acquisition of land and the provision of the necessary budget to deliver the site.

The meeting closed at 7:56pm

Chair

Date